

Section II. REVITALIZATION PLANNING HISTORY

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### Introduction

The early-1980's has seen the execution of a first phase of a concerted program for the commercial revitalization of the Essex CBD. Today, the impending completion of that first phase is the occasion for undertaking this present study, to assess progress to date and to recommend the next steps to be taken. Three plans for the commercial revitalization of the core area were undertaken prior to the execution of the first phase: the Murphy-Williams study (1976), the American City Corporation study (1978), and the Revitalization Plan prepared by Baltimore County staff (1980).

The 1980 Revitalization Plan set the stage for recent revitalization efforts in Essex, and it is reviewed in detail below. Here, brief summaries of the Murphy-Williams and American City Corporation studies are presented; they provided important analytical and strategy input to the Revitalization Plan, and much statistical data from those two studies have been included in this study to establish trends in floor space condition and utilization. Basically, the Murphy-Williams study provided an in-depth analysis of problems in the core area, while the American City Corporation study focused on a market analysis to identify market potentials and recommend a revitalization strategy. That strategy was picked up, elaborated and modified, and developed into a revitalization program in the 1980 Revitalization Plan. Problems identified in the 1976/1978 plans and rated as high priority for improvement included access and parking, and obsolescence in the retail core:

1. Access and Parking:

- o high volume of through traffic
- o deficiencies in the numbers of spaces available
- o very poor access to parking from thoroughfares
- o poor location of spaces in relation to shops

2. Retailing: Obsolescence:

- o while gross square footage is substantial, the core does not meet the criteria for a regional center (no department store), a community center (no junior department, discount or large variety store), or neighborhood center (no supermarket)
- o cannot compete with surrounding shopping centers
- o large vacancies (48,000 square feet, or 14 percent)
- o poor appearance of area and poor condition of many structures, cannot command higher rents needed for better maintenance
- o lack of large anchors to generate shopper traffic
- o lack of shoppers goods and specialty shops
- o store units that are too large for modern shops
- o absence of high quality businesses; large number of marginal businesses attracted by low rents
- o high rate of business failure and turnover
- o changing demographic mix: older, moderate income

A number of policy recommendations were advanced for CBD revitalization, and key projects were identified. Recommend policies and strategies, and identified opportunities for a strengthened core, are summarized below. Specific projects are elaborated in more detail in the discussion of the 1980 Revitalization Plan, to follow.

3. Goals and Strategies to Re-establish the Essex Town Center:

- o establish a role for the Town Center: balanced mix of retail (neighborhood shopping facilities), private office space, and public office space and facilities (government multi-purpose center)
- o retail opportunities: supermarket (25,000 square feet), shoppers goods stores (75,000 square feet); especially apparel; hardware/drug/variety complex; home furnishings, antiques center), and services
- o local-serving office opportunities: 50,000 to 70,000 square feet
- o cultural and entertainment opportunities: ethnic restaurants, theatre, County museum, restore Guttenberger's historic store
- o public facilities opportunities: government offices, retain post office
- o transportation policy: reverse current policy to maximize flow; increase access to shoppers: auto, transit, pedestrian
- o parking policy: more spaces, more free space, more curbside space, better security and lighting, more evenly distributed spaces
- o streetscape policy: facade improvement program, streetscape program (furniture, planters, walkways, festive effects/maritime theme, signage).

### The 1980 Action Plan

In 1980 Baltimore County staff prepared a Revitalization Plan for Essex that built upon and extended many of the ideas and concepts that had been previously advanced in studies of the CBD by Murphy/Williams (1976) and the American City Corporation (1978). The 1980 Revitalization Plan included an Action Plan which set forth a physical concept and plan for revitalization of the CBD, and various other plan elements to guide the implementation of the Action Plan (Relocation Plan, Administration Plan, etc.). The Action Plan has served as a basis and guide for revitalization projects within the CBD for the past eight years.

It is now timely to review the status of the Action Plan recommendations to assess the success of those projects that have been implemented, to determine whether other projects proposed but not yet implemented are still valid and needed, and to reevaluate the timetable and priorities for implementation of such projects. The discussion to follow summarizes the recommendations of the 1980 Action Plan and reports on the status of their implementation.

#### Public Facilities

The basis for the design of the Action Plan is the concept of the Village Center, which was conceived as two (public sector) anchors connected by landscaped streetway (Eastern Avenue). Baltimore County approved a \$600,000 bond issue to carry out the first phase elements of the Action Plan, which are described below.

1. Reconstruction of Eastern Avenue. Improvements to and beautification of the streetscape between the anchors was seen as essential to creating an inviting environment for upgraded shops, improved traffic flow, and increased access to shopping and parking. Among the specific recommendations were:

- o Widening (four feet each side).
- 7400 o The addition of 10 foot parking lanes each direction.
- 110 - 12 o The addition of a 12 foot median strip, landscaped with trees.
- 7400 o Grass and brick pedestrian crossings, with extended nosings.
- N4 o Left turn lanes at critical intersections.
- 115 o Move utility poles to alleys to allow additional lanes.
- 7400 o Improve the pavement in alleys.
- 116 o Demolish the Franklin Warehouse, widen the alley.
- 7400 o Landscape and brick the walks/textured concrete, greenery.

These recommendations proved to be quite ambitious, and compromises with the State Highway Department were necessary to achieve many of the objectives. For example, the median could not be widened or planted. A parking lane was added, but not to the full 10 foot width desired. One-third additional on-street parking (33 spaces) was accomplished by changing parallel parking to diagonal parking. New turning lanes could not be fit into the existing right-of-way, and the utility poles were not moved. The Franklin Warehouse was not demolished, but the alleys did receive a pave-over, and there is more employee parking there than previously.

The sidewalks were landscaped and upgraded to the greatest extent that is likely to be achieved, but the coverage did not include the full 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Avenue. Instead, improvements stopped short of the half block between Margaret and Woodward. There are some significant uses in this stretch, and completion of the improvements should be considered. Creation of a pocket park at 521 Eastern Avenue is under consideration (the former Delia Motors lot). However, the \$100,000 budget available to the Department of Recreation and Parks may not be sufficient for both acquisition and improvements.

2. Creation of Public Sector Anchors. The two facilities envisioned as the anchors for the Village Center greenway were the Essex Heritage Society museum (the old fire and police station) at 514 Eastern Avenue, and a Government Center one block to the west at Eastern Avenue and Taylor Avenue. The museum has been completed and is a viable weekend attraction. Since the facility is staffed entirely by volunteers and does not operate on weekdays, its impact is somewhat limited. The Government Center was conceived as a "State District Court -- Multi-Service Center" to be grouped around an open courtyard or plaza, with these components and characteristics:

- o State District Court Functions -- 22,500 square feet
- o Baltimore County Satellite Office -- 20,000 square feet
- o Various other State, Federal functions
- o A newly constructed Williamsburg-type building, or
- o As an alternative, acquisition and rehabilitation of 431-433 Eastern Avenue (36,000 square feet)
- o Acquisition of 435-7 and/or 427-9 for plaza and services
- o An expanded Post Office as part of the Government Center complex or adjacent with pedestrian linkage

EDCO and the County were not successful in securing the location within the CBD of the State District Court or other state and federal offices, but a new Government Center was successfully established as a County multi-service complex, including the Post Office. The status of Action Plan proposals to date is:

- o The Government Services Center complex at 439 Eastern Avenue was renovated in 1983, with approximately 18,000 square feet of space.

- o It was not possible to create an open court area, however, as the owner chose to rehabilitate the properties for shops and offices rather than sell them to the County.
  - o Major County tenants include Social Services (15,000 square feet) and Permits (1,000 square feet), plus offices of EDCO and other agencies. The Motor Vehicle Administration is also a major tenant.
  - o The Post Office was relocated from its previous location at Maryland and Taylor Avenues, to expanded quarters in the lower (rear) portion of the Government Services Center, with access from Taylor and Maryland.
  - o In 1984-85 the vacant structures at 431-433 Eastern Avenue were rehabilitated for a County Occupational Training Center, with 36,000 square feet of space. The building is under long term lease. The structure at 435-437 remains in private ownership and in occupancy by the Salvation Army and a sub shop.
  - o The building vacated by the Post Office at Maryland and Taylor Avenues remains vacant; a dress factory had occupied the structure briefly, but failed. The Occupational Training Administration may consider it for an adult literacy center to support the training center, as the GED is required for admittance to the training program. The building next door houses the cerebral palsy daycare center and offices.
3. Construction of Public Parking Facilities. Creation of additional parking in the CBD was considered crucial to the successful revitalization of the area. Among the proposals of the Action Plan were the following projects:
- o A new lot on the Franklin Warehouse property
  - o Construction of a parking deck at the Government Center



o Interconnection of lots to the rear of stores

The Franklin Warehouse project has not been pursued, nor has the construction of the parking deck. Since existing Revenue Authority lots are underutilized, it has been difficult to justify the construction of a new parking deck. It appears, however, that the problem with the Revenue Authority lots is their distance from the center of activity in the CBD; the deck would have been much more centrally located. The lot to the rear of 439 Eastern Avenue is ostensibly reserved for Post Office patrons, and an adjacent lot is for Post Office use only. The lot in the 500 block opposite the post office is usually well-occupied.

Connection of lots to the rear of stores by an expanded alleyway would require the petitioning of 60 percent of adjacent property owners. Owners of commercial properties supported the action, but the residents on the south side (Maryland Avenue) would not, as it would take away from backyards; thus, no action has been taken for lack of support.

4. Maintenance Program. The idea was to establish cooperative agreements with owners to maintain the landscaped frontages on Eastern Avenue. It was envisioned that the CETA program could continue to provide assistance in maintaining the public right-of-way (this federal program has been discontinued). In reality, the landscaping has been much more modest than proposed in the action plan, consisting primarily of the location of planters, and no formal agreement for maintenance has been entered into with property owners. EDCO has a small budget for a part-time maintenance person, and utilizes volunteers (teenager summer work programs, Baltimore Area Retarded Corps, etc.). Coordination of these activities for consistent maintenance has been difficult, however, and trash remains a problem in Essex.
5. Lighting. The Action Plan proposed two types of improved lighting for the CBD: (1) high twin mast luminaries in the Eastern Avenue median; and (2) pedestrian lamps on Eastern Avenue sidewalks, and along adjacent side streets. Since a widened median could not be constructed, the first of these proposals was not implemented. Lamps were installed on Eastern Avenue but not on adjacent streets.

### Commercial Facilities

Commercial revitalization includes physical improvements and marketing improvements, including improvement of tenant mix and business operations and promotion. Public physical improvements were discussed above, and private improvements will be discussed below. This discussion will focus on Action Plan concepts for layout and mix of commercial activities in the core area (the plan did not directly address promotion or business operations). With respect to retailing concepts and mix, it may be that changes in market factors, and in the types of public improvements that have actually been made (as opposed to proposed in the Action Plan), have rendered the original Action Plan concepts obsolete. Discussion in the next section will consider the need to replace those concepts with more realistic objectives. The retailing concepts and proposals of the Action Plan, and changes made in the CBD to date, are summarized in the paragraphs to follow.

1. An Extended Commercial Mall for the 400-500 block Eastern Avenue was to be the heart of a revitalized commercial core in the Essex CBD. It was believed that the two public sector "anchors" -- the Government Services Center and the Heritage Museum -- would help generate pedestrian traffic in the area and would define a street segment within which streetscape improvements and commercial activities would be concentrated. Three key proposals of the Action Plan were:
  - o Redevelopment of the major commercial structure on the south side of the 500 block of Eastern Avenue. Among the guidelines recommended for this redevelopment were:
    - \* Retention of the two-story center portion of the structure was seen as critical for a supermarket;

- \* Other retail functions would be added as needed in the CBD: drug, variety, hardware, family shoes, womens apparel and/or fabric, liquor, laundry/cleaners, etc.
  - \* Existing merchants of appropriate types would be concentrated here through relocation from their current premises;
  - \* An arcade would be run through the length of the building to facilitate subdivision for smaller shops (the 120-foot depth of the structure is a problem for shop layout);
  - \* A pedestrian overpass would be constructed to link the commercial structure to the Government Center.
- o Rehabilitation of the shops at 423-425 Eastern Avenue; and
  - o The creation of an antiques center in the CBD, based on the existence of several well-established enterprises.

The creation of this commercial mall has not taken place, and the recent completion of the Makro/Ames shopping center at a former junk yard on Diamond Point may have permanently altered the market conditions favoring a supermarket-centered retail center in downtown Essex. The scope of the downtown is changed; most of the space on Eastern Avenue is well-occupied (with notable exceptions), but the orientation is away from traditional retail toward offices, services, and convenience/low end retail.

The large commercial structure has not been renovated or re-tenanted. The Eastern Avenue frontage is well-occupied with a mix of shops, offices and services. The former A&P portion remains vacant. Current plans at EDCO favor a small business incubator in the vacant space. The concepts of an arcade through the building and a pedestrian overpass to the Government Center remain intriguing but may be prohibitively expensive.

An antique center concept was attempted but was not successful, as this is not a prime location for such a center. Most of the authentic antiques dealers have moved away; the remaining shops either deal primarily outside the area, or are better characterized as used merchandise and thrift stores. The structure at 423-425 Eastern Avenue remained in poor shape through 1988. It was recently damaged severely by fire. Currently, it is vacant but under renovation.

The public sector anchors are not likely to be able to generate the retail support that was envisioned in the Action Plan. Essex has over half of all the subsidized housing in Baltimore County, and most of the visitors to the multi-service government center are of modest income. Motor Vehicle Registration is the most frequented office after the various County offices, and the third most frequented is the Post Office. It was noted above that the museum is open only on the weekends. Students and trainees at the occupational center do make extensive use of the fast food establishments in the CBD, however. Based on a thorough analysis of retail potentials in Essex, this report will consider whether the retail mall concept is obsolete for the CBD, and whether a revised mixed-use concept is in order.

2. Private Office Space and Business Services. The concept of the Action Plan was to focus office development west of the mid-400 block of Eastern Avenue, and on Eastern Avenue east of Margaret Avenue. This would minimize dilution of the retail concentration planned for commercial mall in the 400 and 500 blocks. Care was to be taken not to displace retail, and to coordinate office development with relocation of shops to the mall area.

There has been much leasing activity for offices and services in the CBD, but not well-coordinated or necessarily in conformance with the Action Plan concept. The higher rents that can be obtained through office leases have encouraged landlords to convert to office use all along the Eastern Avenue frontage. This has had the effect of further breaking up what remains of the former retail concentration in the CBD.

3. Entertainment Facilities. The Action Plan envisioned an intensification of entertainment and related activities to be concentrated in the core area. Proposed were a Twin Cinema, to be housed in the major commercial structure in the 500 block of Eastern Avenue or other appropriate site, and a complement of ethnic restaurants nearby in the CBD. An attempt was made to market the cinema concept, but without success. The CBD does have a number of restaurants that offer Italian and Greek dishes, but these are primarily mom-and-pop family restaurants rather than ethnic specialty restaurants.

#### Private Rehabilitation

The key to revitalization is to induce private property owners to make improvements to their own properties. Action Plan proposals for revitalized commercial structures in the CBD would require joint public-private actions. Since the public sector would be making substantial investments in public buildings, infrastructure and streetscape, as described above, it was anticipated that those investments could "leverage" corresponding investments by the private sector in commercial facilities. Further, these improvements must include all structures, non-commercial as well as commercial, if the appearance and ambiance of the CBD is to achieve the objectives sought for a revitalized downtown.

No formal structure or agreements for such leveraging were created, however, and the response of the private sector has been somewhat spotty, often not in conformance with the plan. Key proposals of the Action Plan for specific structures were summarized above, noting the current status of those proposals. Broader objectives for private improvements in the CBD are described here, again noting the current status of these proposals.

1. Residential Uses. The Action Plan did not oppose the retention of some residential uses in the CBD, in the form of upper floor apartments or residences of proprietors. Indeed, those residences could add depth and ambience to the commercial area. Consequently, the renovation of those upper floor apartments was included as an objective of the plan.
2. Upgrade Facades. The "face" that the CBD presents to the community is its facade frontage and the streetscape that connects and integrates individual store fronts the length of the business district. Consequently, the improvement of facades along both sides of the 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Avenue is high priority for a revitalized CBD.
3. Government Support Facilities. To take advantage of, and to provide support services for, the new Government Services Center, the Action Plan proposed the redevelopment of 413-417 and 420 Eastern Avenue as offices.
4. Business Services Building. The Action Plan proposed to set up a new business services center to house service establishments not needed in the high priority retail core -- and pre-empting prime retail space -- in order to free up buildings there. Space could be new construction or rehab, lease or condominium, and would accommodate relocated tenants. Examples include printing, kitchen, decorator, small suppliers, etc.

A considerable amount of facade and other renovations has been accomplished in the Essex CBD, although the business services and government support offices concepts have not been implemented as recommended in the Action Plan. Among the better residential property improvements are those to the structure at 532 Eastern Avenue, which created four new apartments targeted for senior citizens. Most second story apartments on the south side of the 400 block were burned out in the recent fire. The renovations underway at the property will convert the space to offices.

Both sides of the 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Avenue have had substantial improvements to facades, and to some interiors -- perhaps two-thirds of the structures have been affected. The problem has been lack of design controls, so that while the appearance of the retail corridor in the CBD has been greatly improved, there is still no sense of the identifiable retail village image envisioned in the Action Plan. An attempt was made to provide an integrated design for 423-425 Eastern Avenue, but the owner chose not to apply for renovation funds under the Baltimore County loan program and ignored the designs in making alterations to the property. The structures at 413-417 and 420 Eastern Avenue remain in poor condition; but as they remain occupied, the owner has seen little need to improve them.

In evaluating the results that have been accomplished in facade and other improvement to private structures, the original goals of the Action Plan should be tempered by emerging trends in the corridor. Failure to get State Highway Administration approval of widened medians, and the inability to implement other traffic controls, mean that traffic remains relatively heavy and travels at excessive speeds through the corridor. This perpetuates the barriers to shopping movements -- both of pedestrians in the CBD and shoppers' vehicles attempting to gain access to parking -- that helped create the decline in retail activity in the CBD in the first place. Consequently, the role of the CBD for retail is still in doubt, and the failure to create an appealing atmosphere of charming small shops through facade improvements is not too surprising.

It should also be noted that marketing practices in the CBD are primitive, at best. Window displays and merchandise layout are poor in most stores, and there has not been a successful attempt to market and promote the CBD, such as through joint advertising, special festive days or late hours, or other organized activity. These are ingredients to successful retailing that must go hand-in-hand with physical improvements to buildings and infrastructure. EDCO could play a key role in promoting

and marketing the revitalized CBD. This will become increasingly important as physical improvements are completed.

#### Timetable for Implementation and Future Needs

The Action Plan proposed a two-year timetable to complete a first phase of revitalization activity in the Essex CBD, to include streetscapes, the government complex, and a business services center. Future phases would address improvements to the large retail structure on the south side of the 500 block of Eastern Avenue, business development for improved retail tenant mix, and office development. The proposed timetable was as follows:

1. Streetscape Program

- o CETA program: continuing
- o ROW/streetscape improvements, widenings: 1/80 - 6/82
- o Private facade improvements: 1/80 - 1/82

2. Government Center Complex

- o Services Center building: 9/80 - 6/82
- o Parking structure (Revenue Authority): 9/80 - 6/82

3. Private Business Services Building

- o Building (re-) development: 1/81 - 6/82
- o Tenant relocation: 1/82 - 2/82

4. Future Phases

- o Major commercial structure (500 block south side)
  - \* Building reconstruction
  - \* Supermarket
  - \* Entertainment complex
  - \* Shops



- o Business development to enhance tenant mix
- o Private office space to bracket the retail core

As noted above, the parking deck and business services building projects have not been implemented and are not anticipated for future phases. Otherwise, scheduling of projects is running three to five years behind the rather ambitious and unrealistic timetable of the Action Plan. The CETA program is no longer in existence to provide maintenance assistance for the streetfront. Financing has been an issue in terms of County and State shares. Ultimately, both have made substantial financial contributions to streetscape improvements, but the result has been a long delay in completing the improvements. Those improvements completed by 1986-1987, and in place today, are likely to be the extent to be undertaken for the sites treated. One exception is the "pocket park" proposed at the Delia Motors site.

Currently, improvements are planned at a number of private properties: Jender Printing (Concept Two), for example, and several other shops. The burned property at 423-425 Eastern Avenue is undergoing repairs and conversion of upper floors for office, as noted previously. Lease-up of offices in the CBD is proceeding well without a targeted program, although there is encroachment on areas originally planned as retail. New office space has not been developed, however. A notable gap in the revitalization program for the CBD is completion of improvements to the 500 block of Eastern Avenue above Margaret Avenue. This portion of the Phase I target area was not addressed, probably because of budget limitations. In Phase II of EDCO's program, the target area is to be extended to include Eastern Avenue westward to the Back River bridge; this extended area will be addressed in this report. A future phase (Phase III) will extend improvements east to Marlyn Avenue.

To date, there has not been the development of a business plan for marketing and promoting the CBD, nor a business assistance program to help entrepreneurs improve their merchandising techniques and target their markets. The current loan program is limited to loans for facade and interior improvements; other financial incentives are not available, nor any financial assistance for working capital. If, in fact, the retail strategy of the Action Plan is still viable for the CBD, some of these other incentives and assistance programs would be in order.

#### Summary

This section has described previous planning and revitalization activities for Essex. Sections III and IV, to follow, recommend a direction for the next phase of revitalization activity in the expanded downtown Essex study area. These recommendations will be based on identified market potentials, evaluation of progress in revitalization efforts to date, and current thinking by EDCO and County staff on priorities and proposals for upcoming projects.